

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

CURRENT ISSUES.

LAST month we noticed the acute protest of Professor E. F. Scott against the undue claims made by some psychologists in the sphere of religion. The same subject is treated by Professor E. J. Price in the July number of the *Hibbert Journal*. He too is moved to point out that psychology is neither theology nor philosophy, and that it has strict limitations when one comes to interpret what is involved in the mental processes which it analyses.

* * * * *

Professor Price takes the question of prayer. Now many psychologists find no difficulty whatever in prayer. They recognise the immense aid that prayer brings to certain natures. But they explain this commonly as the result of auto-suggestion. Under our lives there is supposed to lie a reservoir of energy of which we are normally unconscious, but on which we draw in hours of special stress. "Prayer is just one of the means through which these resources are tapped, and its efficacy depends upon faith in the process of prayer and upon persistence." That is, prayer is a form of suggestion. In tense moments we suggest to ourselves this reservoir within, and as we believe in it we are the better and braver.

* * * * *

But psychology cannot rule out the religious belief that in prayer we are in touch with more than our own subconscious state. "If prayer is no more than the release of our own sub-conscious resources by way of suggestion," as Professor Price rightly asks, "is it more than lifting ourselves up by our own bootlaces? Will a man continue to pray if he believes that in prayer he is merely tapping his own subconscious?" The hypothesis of a divine activity in prayer is essential even from the philosophical point of view, as some psychologists are

ready to admit, and it is absolutely essential from the religious point of view.

* * * * *

For in prayer the religious man's desire is to be with Another, in touch with Another's life, not with his own. Dean Burroughs brings this out in his excellent little pamphlet on *Prayer in Practice*, contributed to the "Anglican Evangelical Movement" series. He is arguing that in prayer man expresses his desire to be consciously with God; that, and not the desire to have some petition granted, is the primary element in prayer. He tells this anecdote by way of illustration. "A small girl came into her father's study when he was specially busy. 'Well, child,' he asked, a little sharply, 'what do you want now?' And he felt he had learned a lesson in the meaning of prayer when the child answered, 'Nothing, father, I only want to be with you.'"

* * * * *

This thought, that God's presence is our supreme help, is brought out in the last chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews. The writer declares that God "hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper." Why this confidence? Simply because to be assured of God's unfailing presence is the supreme help of life. If we have that, we have everything. It is not a question of Him doing this or that for us, but of Him never leaving us to ourselves—never leaving us to face the difficulties of life with only the subconscious to fall back upon!

* * * * *

The Scottish Church Society has issued a posthumous volume of sermons by the late Professor James Cooper, of the University of Glasgow. It is called *Kindness to the Dead and other Sermons*. Professor Cooper's historical and dogmatic interests are well known to many, and these, together with his rare devoutness of spirit, come out in these thirteen discourses. One of them is on "The Church and the Poets." It was preached in Jedburgh Parish Church on September 20, 1903, to commemorate the meeting of Wordsworth and Scott in that town a hundred years before.

* * * * *

Professor Cooper recalls the fact that both Scott and Wordsworth influenced to some extent the Oxford movement, which, as he says, "restored the true Catholic faith" in Denmark as

well as in England. He recalls the congregation to "a more diligent study of their works, a more familiar acquaintance with their poetry, a nearer fellowship with their lofty and noble spirits. If in their writings there be aught that is *true and honest*, aught that is *just, and pure, and lovely, and of good report*; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. So shall they welcome you at the last, not judge you."

* * * * *

Professor Cooper, of course, admits that Wordsworth was the greater poet of the two. I do not think he would have admitted this of Byron. He once argued to me solemnly that Byron's poetry was inferior to that of Scott. Which, of course, was the result of a moralistic estimate, the same kind of estimate that makes some of John Wesley's criticisms of literature sound so strange. But in this sermon he contrasts Scott not with Byron but with Burns. And Scott, he claims, was a truer prophet than Burns. For "the direction, at least, in which Burns was moving, was to something colder and less living still" than the rigid Calvinism against which both he and Scott reacted. Burns' tendency "was toward Socinianism—that denial of our Lord's Divinity which always has meant spiritual death."

* * * * *

The EXPOSITOR has always welcomed contributions from any quarter of the earth, but it is not often that one has come from China. We have special pleasure in publishing this month the first part of an essay by Mr. H. H. Rowley, who is teaching in the Shantung Christian University at Tsinanfu. Mr. Rowley was trained under the late Professor Buchanan Gray at Oxford, and his paper is of special importance just now, when in certain quarters there is too much reactionary writing on the book of Daniel. We hope soon to publish a new study of the prophet Nahum by Mr. W. W. Cannon, whose pages on Hosea during the earlier months of this year have excited such deserved interest.

* * * * *

The Bishops of the American Protestant Episcopal Church recently issued a manifesto, calling for a stricter adherence to the letter of the creeds. Among other statements they declared that it is "irreconcilable with the vows voluntarily made at ordination for a minister of this Church to deny, or to suggest doubt as to the facts and truths declared in the Apostles' Creed."

There are a hundred and forty-four bishops, and sixty-five were present at this gathering. Now the Faculty of the Episcopal Theological School at Cambridge has taken up this manifesto, and issued a statement with regard to it. The controversy does not concern outsiders vitally, except in so far as it raises questions long familiar to the Churches in this country. But the Faculty make some remarks which are of wide significance.

* * * * *

One is, that any dispute in the Church requires to be managed in a Christian spirit. The Faculty are addressing the alumni of the school. They point out wisely that the issue is an opportunity. An opportunity for what? Not for sarcastic talk. Not for a Pharisaic spirit. "May we all take the opportunity to seek out those with whom we disagree, and in conversation and conference talk things over with the utmost candour, remembering that we are brothers in one family, assuming that the religious experience of him with whom we talk is as deep and as rich as our own."

* * * * *

This is indeed a true word. A hard saying, no doubt, but one which is only hard as people forget their common membership in the Church. Differences of opinion are a trial, a trial in families and in the family of the Church. What gives the right atmosphere in which they can be handled is the generous spirit inculcated by our American friends. Controversy may be an extraordinarily useful thing in the Church. That is, if it is on fundamental questions. Also, if it is carried on with a proper spirit of humility, without self-seeking. But zeal for the truth is apt to conceal personal animosities, and to produce a scornful temper in which the right cause may be urged on entirely wrong principles.

* * * * *

A number of years ago Dr. A. B. Davidson called attention to a feature in the Old Testament which surprises the modern reader. It is the emphasis upon the sins of the tongue, sins like slander and backbiting. The psalms are full of warnings against this odious class of sins. Some of the psalmists seem to have suffered from imputations and false charges. They knew what was meant by the "strife of tongues," the sharp words that fall from religious people in a temper, the poisonous gossip

that spreads trouble in a community. In those days public opinion was largely a matter of talk. Orientals had a gift of abusive speech, which took the place of the modern newspapers.

* * * * *

But Dr. Davidson pointed out one difference between the old world and our own. He slyly observed that "in those days, from the want of the means of public speech, slander was the weapon of strong men; it has now very much fallen into the hands of the weak things of the world, such as controversial writers on Scripture, and we mind it less." We mind it less, personally, perhaps. But it is a sin which we are bound to do something to overcome in others, even to rebuke, in the hope of exorcising it. We ought to shame such people out of their habit of making insinuations against other Christians who may not happen to share their opinions about doctrines like inspiration. If they can be shamed out of such evil practices, it is all to the good. And the way suggested by our American friends is the excellent way, to try if possible to get into touch with them, not in any superior spirit but with the desire to understand one another better.

* * * * *

The other wise word to which attention should be called in this declaration, comes at the close. The Faculty confess that the real ground of anxiety to-day does not lie, for them, exactly where the good bishops seem to see it. The supreme reason for anxiety lies not in any divergence over matters of opinion but in "our halfheartedness in the religious affirmations that we share." What they mean is that the practical confession of Christ as Lord is the trying test. "Are we prepared to accept in our lives the implications of that confession, to permit Christ to be the Lord of our appetites, the Lord of our relations with our neighbours, the Lord of our family life, of our industrial and business relations?"

* * * * *

It is a right and timely thing to recall this difficulty of difficulties. It does not mean that the importance of truth or doctrine is denied or minimised. It is not an attempt to evade inconvenient questions, or to shirk honest statements of belief. Rather it is a sense that when such a problem of loyalty to the Lord is recognised to be the central thing, then this recognition

will give the right focus for looking at any other issue. There is no surer way of rising above the censorious spirit in religious controversy than the practice of this habit, the habit of calling ourselves to strict account for our loyalty to the faith of our Lord. All else in the Church is a means to that end.

* * * * *

Controversy is apt to suffer from the lack of perspective and proportion. The secondary assumes the place of the primary. People almost forget the end of religion in their ardent concern for the means. The immediate issue seems to bulk more largely in the mind than what is central, and the result is an irritable spirit. It is possible that even such Christian words as those we have just quoted from this American statement may sound to some beside the mark, and annoy instead of attracting. For it is one law of life that we dislike those who cannot bring themselves to share our eager opinions almost more than those who actually oppose them. People resent the attitude of one who seems to take a larger view, looking over their heads to deeper issues and a larger horizon. Yet it is such spirits who are in the right. Difficulties, doubts? Yes, but as Principal Denney used to say, in his incisive manner, "there is only one real religious difficulty, the difficulty of being religious." The need of the Church is to concentrate on that; in other words to do, as our American friends want their bishops to do, to call ourselves and others humbly and strictly to account for the measure of our practical loyalty to the gospel we profess.

* * * * *

If anyone desires to know fully and painfully the meaning of "I have seen an end of all perfection," let him publish a translation of the New Testament. I have revised my own with care three times since it was first published, and lynx-eyed critics have helped in the work. But one slip remained undetected till the other day, when Dr. Forrest, of the University of Virginia, who was doing some critical work upon the book of Revelation, noticed that Rev. v. 6 ran, "It had seven heads and seven eyes!" In his communication he kindly remarks, "As there is no authority in any manuscript or version for *heads*, it is no doubt a misprint for the usual reading *horns*." It is. I take this opportunity of thanking Dr. Forrest and of calling attention penitently to the slip, that readers may correct it for themselves.